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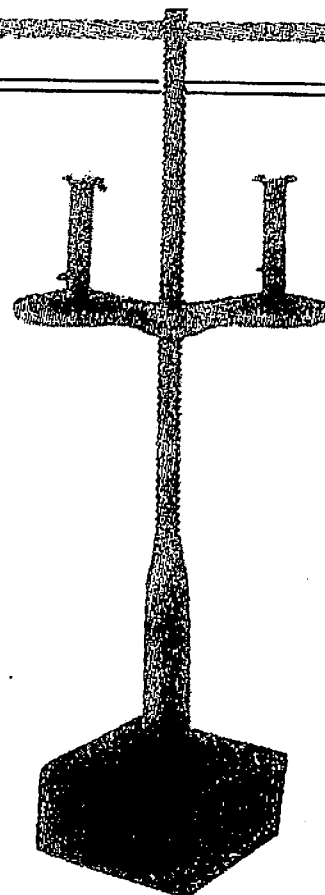
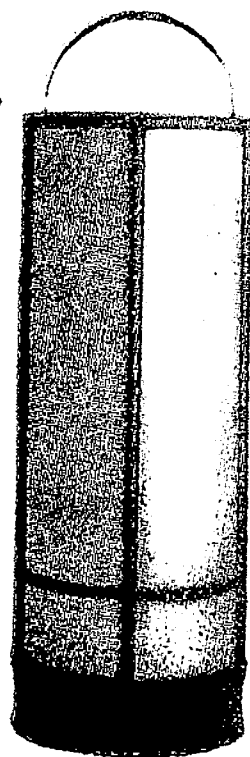
Simple gifts

A Duxbury show explores the kindred spirit of Shaker and Japanese design

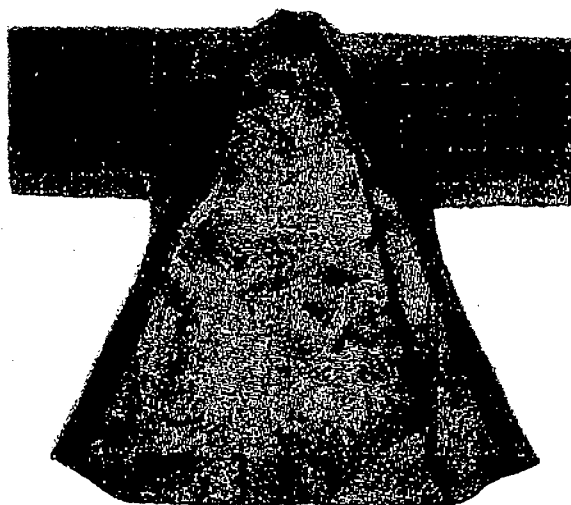
By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The members of the Shaker sect that flourished in 19th-century America knew virtually nothing of Japanese culture, it's safe to say. And 19th-century Japanese were unaware of what, from their perspective, would have been an obscure religious splinter group half a world away.

But on opposite sides of the globe at just about the same time, the Shakers and the Japanese were making objects for everyday use that were startlingly similar, either in shape or spirit.



A MOVABLE PANEL PROVIDES ACCESS TO THE WICK IN THE JAPANESE LANTERN, WHILE THE TWIN LIGHTS IN THE SHAKER LAMP CAN BE RAISED OR LOWERED.



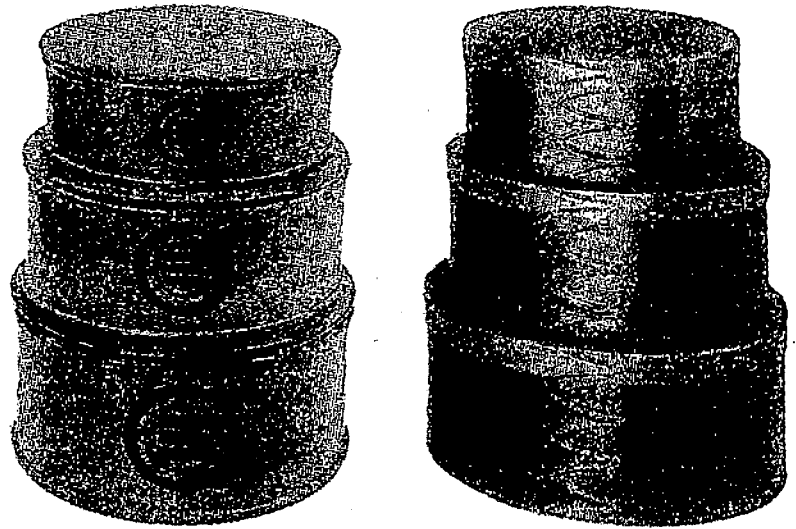
A JAPANESE FIREMAN'S COAT WAS QUILTED TO ABSORB WATER, WHILE A RED SHAKER BROADCLOTH CLOAK HAS SIMILAR CONTOURS.

Baskets in an open hexagonal weave; broad-brimmed hats to protect from the sun; furniture on wheels; wooden pails; clothing of meticulous craftsmanship and ingenious design: All were common to both cultures.

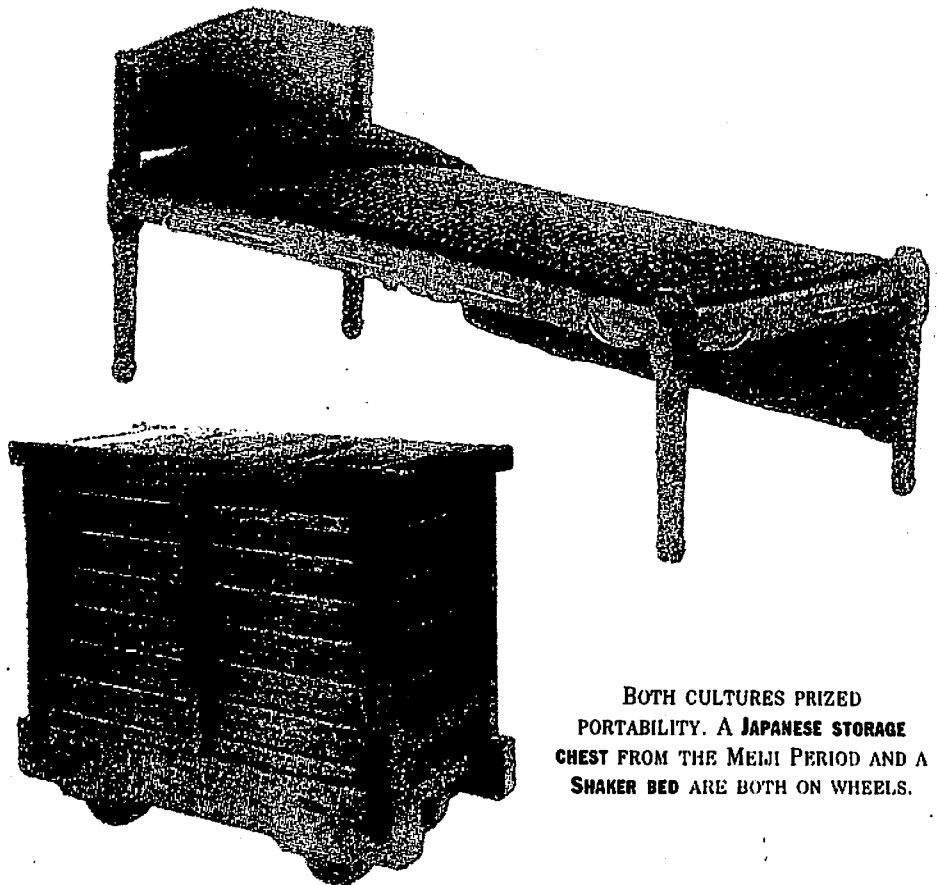
That common ground is the subject of "Kindred Spirits: The Eloquence of Function in American Shaker and Japanese Arts of Daily Living," an exhibition of 200 objects, mostly 19th century, that are as streamlined and simple as that title is convoluted. "Kindred Spirits" is at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury through Sept. 8. Although the exhibition was organized by the Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art in California, its origins are in the Duxbury museum, where the show's curator, the Wellesley-based Japanese art expert William Thrasher, saw the ACM's fine collections of both Japanese and Shaker art side by side as he was rooting through storage in the late 1980s.

It would be folly to try to take the similarities between the two cultures too far. There are significant differences, the attitude toward figuration for one. Images of people and animals are plentiful in Japanese crafts: A fireman's coat in the Duxbury show, made of heavy, absorbent cotton that was purposely soaked with water before the wearer ventured near a burning building, is lined with paintings of a tiger, symbol of ferocity, and drag-

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A SET OF JAPANESE "NESTED" BOXES
AND THEIR SHAKER COUNTERPARTS REPRESENT
STORAGE SYSTEMS WITH BREATHTAKING
SIMPLICITY.



BOTH CULTURES PRIZED
PORTABILITY. A JAPANESE STORAGE
CHEST FROM THE MEIJI PERIOD AND A
SHAKER BED ARE BOTH ON WHEELS.

Kindred spirits: Shaker and Japanese design

■ SIMPLE

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on, symbol of water.

There's nothing comparable in Shaker work, except for the "gift drawings" that were literally records of images that came to Shakers in dreams, "gifts" from the Holy Spirit.

The correspondences between the two cultures, though, were sufficiently strong to inspire Thrasher to organize a whole show of opportunities to compare and contrast. Except for a small 1991 exhibition on the same theme at Carleton College in Minnesota, "Kindred Spirits" is the first to set Shaker and Japanese artifacts side by side and ask us to consider the design similarities in two societies isolated not only from each other, but also, to a large extent, from the wider world. Japan is an island nation; the Shakers lived in out-of-the-way communities. At one point, the Shakers even barred outsiders from their services. Among the odder artifacts in "Kindred Spirits" is a meetinghouse sign that acts as an anti-welcome mat. "Enter not within these gates, for this is my Holy Sanctuary, Saith the Lord," begins the inscription on the sign.

This isolationism has long since given way to cultural crisscrossing, of course, to the point where the distinguished Japanese-American furnituremaker George Nakashima has described himself as "a Japanese Shaker." The same might apply to another famous Japanese-American artist, sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who created the Shakerlike sets for Martha Graham's "Appalachian Spring."

A sense of humility

"Kindred Spirits" is filled with choice objects from public and private collections throughout the United States and Japan; major loans came from Hancock Shaker Village in the Berkshires. A sense of humility informs these objects intended for everyday use by ordinary people. While the designs are functional, the technical standards are high: Both the Shakers and the Japanese prized sound construction.

A strong work ethic rules both these cultures. Thrasher writes in a wall text that "in conventional Judeo-Christian interpretations of the story of creation, Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden of Eden and forced to work, for having disobeyed God. Thus labor became associated with punishment." Not to Shaker founder Mother Ann Lee, though, whose motto was "hands to work, hearts to God." Not to the Japanese, either, writes Thrasher, citing their "sense of work as a privilege, for it defines one's place within a nation divinely anointed."

The results of all this labor are visually stunning: tools, furniture and apparel that share crisp contours and a respect for natural materials. Even the scale of certain objects arrests the eye. Consider a diminutive Shaker version of a "grandfather" clock: About half the size of most such clocks, it has a playfulness not generally associated with the austerity of Shaker life. But its ingenuity is quintessentially Shaker. Actually an alarm clock used to summon the faithful to meals and meetings, it's a clever substitute for the individual watches and clocks deemed too expensive by the community. Built in 1814 by Benjamin Youngs Sr., of the Shaker community in Watervliet, N.Y., this miniature is one of the few works in the ACM show whose maker is known. Most of the objects are by artisans whose very anonymity underscores Thrasher's point that "in both these cultures, the good of the group took precedence over the individual."

Thrasher initially planned to install the show with no labels, so people could feast on the beauty of the objects without the distraction of text. Ultimately, though, text proved essential to explaining the functions of certain objects. Without labels, the uninitiated would have had no clue that the tall, boxy wooden forms with the stones on the bottom and straps on top were used as stilts by Japanese fishermen: They'd strap them on to wade into deep water.

On the other hand, some works need no explanation. In this category are a set of Japanese "nested" boxes and their Shaker counterparts, both the simplest of storage systems. The gradations in size meant that boxes could be stored inside each other when not in use. Their simplicity is breathtaking. In the Shaker boxes, the swallowtail fasteners that help keep the wood from splitting also form a graceful pattern of pointed arches; in the Japanese set, geometric variations of C-inawan family

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crests are the only adornment. The elegance of the shape, the rhythm of the graded sizes, are immensely satisfying all on their own - especially to late 20th-century eyes accustomed to, and appreciative of, minimalism in both fine art and craft.

The subtle, wavy grain of the wood also adds to the visual appeal of the Japanese boxes. Wood grain was, however, a controversial subject to Shakers. The stricter ones were opposed to the use of figured woods in furniture, feeling it too ornamental. But the branch of the sect that spread west was more lenient: One of the most magnificent objects in the ACM show is a chest of drawers in an exuberantly figured tiger maple, made around 1840 in Ohio.

Both the Japanese and the Shakers prized portability - for different reasons. A Japanese storage chest from the Meiji Period of the late-19th or early-20th century is on wheels. Fire was a constant threat in Japanese houses, which were made of wood, paper and grass, with open flames used for light and cooking. Being able to evacuate belongings quickly was essential - even belongings as big as this massive chest. A Shaker bed is also on wheels - but in this case mobility was intended to make cleaning under the bed easier and quicker, leaving more time to devote to God.

The ingenuity of both cultures is evident in their lighting designs. The Japanese invented brass candlesticks that folded, to take along when traveling. The Shakers made adjustable lamp stands that allowed for the lights to be raised or lowered, so a shoemaker or tailor could see his work clearly.

Both cultures also respected space. A Japanese staircase in the show has drawers built under the risers, making an overlooked space into a useful one. A Shaker sewing basket is compartmentalized so not a sliver of space goes unused. A Japanese "Snake Basket," named for its cylindrical shape, was weighted with rocks and used to bank soil so it wouldn't erode, thus maximizing land for growing rice.

Objects displayed in context

Roomlike vignettes at the Duxbury museum give a sense of how particular objects were used, how, for instance, the Shakers and traditional Japanese slept - none too comfortably, from a Westerner's perspective. The Japanese slept on tatami mats, on the floor, which were also used as insulation in a country without central heating. Their heads rested on cylindrical basketlike pillows designed to keep elaborate hairdos from disintegrating overnight; sometimes the pillows contained incense burners that would make hair smell nice while its owner slept. The Shaker bed in the show is painted green, the color prescribed by the Millennial Laws that ruled the sect's daily lives. The laws said nothing about the reason for that particular color, but experts now speculate that some ingredient in the green paint may have been poisonous to bedbugs, a problem even to the scrupulously tidy Shakers. The mattress on this green frame would

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have been thin, and filled with straw or corn husks. The coverlet was supposed to be "of a modest color, not checked, striped or flowered," the Millennial Laws stipulated.

Nowhere is the resemblance between the Shaker and Japanese cultures more obvious than in their baskets. Some Shakers may have seen Japanese baskets, which American women used as sewing boxes and handbags in the post-Civil War era. Both cultures used the open-work hexagonal weave extensively, because of its strength, but both also made baskets where the weaving is tight and refined. In the Duxbury show there are baskets that an untutored eye couldn't securely identify as either Shaker or Japanese.

Shaker and Japanese design traditions are far from dead. In a section called "Legacies," the ACM show offers a sampling of contemporary crafts inspired by historical models. These range from oval Shaker boxes by Cape Cod artist Paul Dixon to a lacquered bamboo basket made last year by Tatsuo Matsuda, who works in the same spot in Kyoto where his ancestors were making the same sort of basket 400 years ago. Like the older works in the show, the new ones suggest that Shaker and Japanese cultures were often on the same wavelength. At least on some subjects. "There's still one thing the Japanese simply don't understand about the Shakers," William Thrasher says with a smile, "and that's their celibacy."